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SUBJECT: BILINGUAL SIGN DISPUTE OVERSHADOWS CHANCELLOR'S SLOVENIA
VISIT

11. (U) Summary: A long-running dispute over bilingual signs in Carinthia Province overshadowed Chancellor Faymann's August 26 visit to Slovenia, during which Slovenian PM Pahor called on Faymann to resolve the issue. A contact in the Chancellor's office told the Ambassador that Faymann will try to find a political solution, but said the issue would be difficult to resolve. Pahor reportedly declined Faymann's offer to help mediate Slovenia's border dispute with Croatia. End Summary.

GOA Surprised by Pressure

12. (U) Juergen Meindl, foreign affairs advisor to Chancellor Faymann (SPO), told the Ambassador August 27 that the Austrians were surprised by how assertive Pahor was in pressing for a resolution of the decades-old dispute over bilingual town signs.

13. (U) The Austria State Treaty of 1955 recognizes Slovenes, among other groups, as national minorities, and requires that local governments provide bilingual town signs (road signs featuring the name of the town), as well as education and media, in communities with Slovene or "mixed populations" (i.e. German and Slovene speaking). This was originally interpreted to mean communities in which minorities constitute 25 percent or more of the population. In 2001, the Constitutional Court ruled that the threshold should be lowered to 10 percent. The Slovene minority in Carinthia has access to Slovene language education and media, and bilingual signs have been installed in 77 towns. But the Carinthian Government has, for over 30 years, refused to install enough signs to meet either the 25 percent (91 town signs) or 10 percent (150 town signs) threshold.

A "Trivial" But Difficult Issue

14. (SBU) Meindl said the sign issue was "emotionally overloaded" and politically difficult to resolve. On substance, he maintained, the matter is trivial, involving the installation of approximately 70 additional bilingual signs in towns with a total Slovene population of about 12,000. Burgenland Province has erected bilingual signs without controversy, but in Carinthia - stronghold of the rightwing, nationalist BZO - the government has dug in its heels, he said. (Note: History plays a role in sharpening the dispute - German-speaking Carinthians recall two short-lived occupations by Yugoslavia following each World War, while Slovenes remember Austrian domination within the Hapsburg Empire).

15. (SBU) After meeting with Faymann, Pahor told reporters the GOA is obligated to respect the legal rights of the Slovene minority, and rejected the argument that the dispute requires a political solution. Faymann said in an interview with the Austrian daily Der Standard that he would be willing to advance a solution against the will of the BZO, provided the solution were supported by a combination of other parties forming a majority of the Carinthian

provincial parliament. Meindl told the Ambassador that Faymann will approach the issue cautiously, starting with "informal contacts" in the hope that an agreement can be reached "in a couple of months."

16. (U) Even before his visit to Slovenia, Faymann had come under pressure within Austria to weigh in on the sign issue. In early August, the Vienna weekly Falter published documents indicating that prosecutors had dropped a case against Carinthia Governor Gerhard Doerfler (BZO) for illegally moving a number of signs on the grounds that Doerfler "did not know his actions were illegal." Justice Minister Bandion-Ortner (who is officially independent but was nominated by the OVP), denied that her ministry had made mistakes in the investigation, and suggested that the issue required the Chancellor's intervention.

Pahor Declines GOA Help With Croatia Dispute

17. (U) The dustup over the signs appears to have crowded out other bilateral issues during the Chancellor's visit. However, Faymann reportedly did manage to offer Austrian assistance in mediating Slovenia's border dispute with Croatia, which Pahor politely declined.

Comment: Resolution Will be Difficult

18. (SBU) This seemingly trivial dispute has plagued Austro-Slovene relations for three decades. Despite the pressure on Faymann, it may not be resolved any time soon. Many Carinthians would resent a heavy handed intervention from the national government, and Faymann will not want to undermine the SPO's already weak position in the province. For BZO Governor Doerfler, flouting Vienna, and Ljubljana, on the sign issue is a reliable way to rally the party's

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nationalist base, and he therefore has little reason to back down.

19. (SBU) Because of the sign dispute, and the perception that Austria for economic reasons is eager to see Croatia accede to the EU as soon as possible, it appears that Slovenia does not view Austria as an appropriate mediator in the border dispute with Croatia.